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THE ÆSTHETIC IDEAL

By FR. ROUSSEL-DESPIERRES

Translated from the French

BOOK II—CHAPTER I—*Continued*

ALONGSIDE of these duties there presents itself an interdiction against offering violence to rights acknowledged as personal. These rights we will sum up in the loftiest one of them all, and place them thus under a holier and stronger safeguard, one that is sovereignly to be admired, namely the Ideal. Thus one of the essential laws of morality must consist in respecting the fully conceived Ideal in the case of the other man, an ideal which, as governing life, is the veritable reason of existence.

If one goes to the bottom of things, respect for the Ideal consecrates the upholding of all the rights of the individual recognized by law or the social conventions, and these other rights, not formulated and still more sacred, which imply the will to realize the Ideal. Amid the conflict of rights, even in a society of the better kind, which can not be avoided, always the right of the Ideal will be the supreme, intangible right over which none will or ought to prevail. That is the very essence of right, because it is the groundwork of individual existence. Lowering his own ideal before that of another, the individual may renounce himself; but if society has the right to exact the sacrifice of his life for it, society has not the right to impose on him the sacrifice of his soul.

The Ideal is the very aim of active morality; now—and this is a point I have established in another chapter—the right of obeying the moral conscience is precisely the proof of the existence of individual right. Thus the respect for the Ideal appears as the natural and necessary base of a system of positive morality.

This morality is free, since desire and dreams from which the Ideal is born are entirely personal facts, and thus they escape from the influence of external wills. Among all the conceptions of the Ideal the æsthetic conception, believe me, is the only one which might become universal, because beauty is the fundamental and universal element of desire. No ideal is freer and no morality as free, and in consequence more fruitful, than æsthetic morality. Never insistent, it creates joy, love and beauty while breathing them out. If life has any sense, it is an æsthetic sense. What is the good of a life without beauty, without joy, without love? If the dream of the æsthetic life, if the ideal toward which desire aspires were impossible chimeras, who knows whether it were worth while to preserve existence, and if that fantasy of the Suicide of the Cosmos imagined by Hartmann would not be our most consoling hope?

It is scarcely anything else but animal morality, that of the preservation of the species. Æsthetic morality, on the contrary, is truly human, since it calls on us to realize the loftiest aspirations of thought—and if the divine word which one ought to reserve hereafter to express what there is in man that is more than human—I mean to speak of an already forefelt future—if the divine word has a meaning still—æsthetic morality is more than

human; it becomes divine when it leads our soul to that virtue which was alien to the god of the Christians as it was to the gods of the pagans—smiling charity.

For there lies the limit of the æsthetic process. Among the different kinds of beauty there is a hierarchy. The humblest is the splendor of the plastic or sensible form; in the second degree thought rules—the scientific, artistic or moral idea. Supreme beauty resides in the action and reaction of the creations of the spirit, which, like it, realize the idea, and which equal it as soon as they engender as many benefits. Classic philosophy admitted this æsthetic process. It recognized three kinds of beauty: physical beauty, intellectual beauty and moral beauty; then it summed up the whole of beauty in this last. Thus physical beauty lost its proper value, it was nothing more than a means to express moral beauty.

"Form" wrote Cousin "can not be form alone; it has to be the form of something. So, physical beauty is the sign of an interior beauty which is the spiritual and moral beauty, and 'tis there lies the ground, the principle, the unity of the beautiful."

Kant had already considered beauty like "the symbolical representation of morality. . . . by means of the forms of life." Paradoxical theory, which among some contemporaries will terminate in the condemnation of art! One fact confounds it—that is, the knowledge of moral beauty would be impossible to him who had not the idea of physical beauty. Besides, why allow reality to plastic beauty, only in so far as it is the reflection of moral beauty? Does the conscience consent to the disappearance of this infinite domain of physical beauty, which is so rich a source of joy for all creatures, one that, feeding the desire to live, then to live over again in similar beings, is in the sum the preserver of species and perhaps of all existence? Moreover, what can moral beauty gain from the sacrifice of physical beauty? That is the first educator of the spirit, that is what prepares moral life. Will not the very grandeur of æsthetic morality result with more splendor from the comparison of sensible with intelligible beauty? The moral world does not exist through abstractions. Moral action possesses a concrete, plastic existence. A moral gesture is still a gesture, and the true reason for bringing together beauty and morality is precisely to give to morality the sovereign attraction of æsthetic form.

Just as paradoxical as the spiritualistic idea is the doctrine of the æsthetes, who, indifferent to morality, demand no other prestige from beauty than that of form. Certainly it is a matter of great price, this animal beauty of pure form. But vulgar experience attests that plastic beauty singularly rises above itself when it illuminates an intellectual or moral idea, when it translates and expresses a soul. Is it not by that art of associating the idea with the form that Leonardo da Vinci

raised himself so high above the artists of his age and perhaps of all time? La Gioconda and Saint John are the portraits of two souls as much as they are images of two bodies. It is not the graciousness of their smile which makes their incomparable charm,—it is that gleam of sentiment and thought which one catches in their eyes and on their lips, one that illuminates the physical form all the better because it is more mysterious and more far-away.

To exclude material beauty and to admit nothing but that, are two like and equal errors. The truth is that beneath the sensible form beauty only attains the weakest degree of expression and influence. Admiration for and the cult of pure form are only the primary and least complete manifestations of the æsthetic sense. But also they are the first and most necessary elements.

If form embellishes itself through that which thought adds to it, the glory of thought is to finish up with the act. A conception that does not realize itself is of no value. An eloquent pronouncement is not equal in value to an act, if it fails to give birth to acts. A good action draws its value from its results, and on the other hand an example has a force for propagation which few words equal. From the act the highest expression of life unfolds itself.

And in fact does not all the æsthetic of action reside in the effort made for an idea? Even a good book may not be of equal value with a good deed. Nevertheless there is this or that idea, say of a Rousseau, a Montesquieu, a Darwin which remains infinitely superior to many resounding acts. That is because the idea they have formulated and thrown into the brains of others is something more than an isolated act; it is the generating source of definitive acts and infinite consequences. In order that the action should be truly superior to the idea, it is necessary that it should realize the idea. Napoleon did not realize any grand idea: there is nothing admirable at bottom either in him or in his performances. But the Revolution, which was an act, is superior to Montesquieu and Rousseau, because it realized their dreams. If I raise myself above my admiration for a beautiful work when, in my turn, I conceive a grand thing, I become superior to my thought whenever I realize that thought. This work of art, that book, that speech may attain to the moral act; but for the moralist they only count at the moment when the scattered seed germinates, when acts are born from that lesson, good and æsthetic acts, such as a beautiful work, marble, or speech. There is only criterion for acts and works—the fruitfulness of the teaching or the example.²³

The loftiest beauty is that of creating joy. Work and act are by so much the greater according as they lead to more general consequences. Will does not suffice to give the value of moral efforts to efforts of the spirit; talent is needed—more than that—genius; and something finally, even greater than genius—the fruitful enthusiasm of an admirably beautiful soul.

Thus in three successive stages the æsthetic ascension of the human mind is accomplished; certain faculties correspond to each one of these stages:

Note 23.—Very probably it is the educating virtue of examples and models, acts or works, which measure the value of them.

to physical beauty sensibility and admiration; to intellectual beauty intelligence and desire; to moral beauty passion and will. By the will, which is thus one of the most perfect expressions of beauty, the definitive distinction of being, or in other words, individuality affirms itself and realizes itself. And if universal evolution ends in individuality, the æsthetic ideal is the supreme form of the aspirations of realized individualism. If, in fact, liberty is merely a means to an end, the free individual will not find in himself the end of his moral activity. He can not consider himself as the means to an ideal; therefore, the feeling of individualism toward which tends the effort of the universe is not the happiness of the individual, but the perfection of the mental development of the individual, perfection which expresses itself through the highest and most beautiful moral imaginable, that very one of which Beauty is the symbol and which we call the æsthetic ideal.

An ideal can scarcely be defined. Of it may be said what has been said of God—all the attributes which are determined as to Him end in negations. To attempt to codify the Ideal in scientific formulas would therefore result in singularly reducing its proportions. It is all feeling and it contains as part of sentiment the vague, the mysterious, the infinite. But what is the use of trying to distinguish by means of definitions those systems which approach each other and are even confounded in their practical conclusions? The greater number of older moral theories, the materialistic ones as well as the idealistic, propose to us as duty certain formulas almost similar one to the other.²⁴

It is probable that future systems of morality will hardly differ in this capital point from past systems and that their advantage will consist chiefly in the superiority of their methods. I propose a personal morality and it is necessary now to explain the method.

The Ideal dominates the moral. A new ideal implies, therefore, a transformation of the traditional system of morality.

The elements are combined in christianism, to a certain degree contradictory, and yet both interested: the bond of the Judaic prescription which have the terrestrial salvation of the species for their chief object, and the new dogma of individual immorality. Thus it is that the Christian doctrine is a morality of interest in a twofold degree. Judaism was a religion according to nature; while preserving its essence, christianism suffocated it under the legend of a supra-terrestrial realm. It suppresses nature, condemns its joys, debases and sterilizes life. It strikes a blow at the deepest part of humanity in us, pressing down our thought beneath the bonds of faith and dissolving it in prayer and ecstasy. It has made virtue so rude,

Note 24.—There is a contradiction in the common notion of duty. On the one hand it implies absolute prescriptions which singularly restrict our moral liberty, on the other it admits that duty has no limits, that it is not truly accomplished until that moment when the moral agent attains the goal of his forces and thereby it acknowledges in us a liberty of initiative which greatly surpasses the measure of primary prescriptions. Thus all moral theories in a way include that liberty which in our eyes a true morality supposes to be complete, and which, in effect, ought to consist not only in an independence of facts, but in the right to make good and evil for oneself as a personal conception.

faith so intolerant that a perfect Christian no longer possesses anything that is human.

The æsthetic ideal raises up whatever the Christian dogma has cast down. Among the contradictions of nature it assists the preservative instincts of life, among the aspirations of the living being it selects those which tend toward thought, good, the beautiful. Nevertheless, neither the conscious goal of humanity nor the obscure march of species can limit itself to creating and preserving life. Without question life is eternal. The species and the race of mankind are only the stages over which the living universe climbs toward its destiny. Who can say of life if it be a good, if it be an evil? Like liberty and individuality, it is merely the means to an infinite end. Happiness, no more than life, offers any limit to the ambitions of humanity. It is not the purpose and reason of life; well has it been said that it is only an accident in nature; it appears thus like the result of a harmonious equilibrium, but unstable and transient among vital conditions which, always changing, merely produce a moment of happiness in order to drive it out again, as the wave only touches the shore in order to flee the instant it has struck. The reason for life is beauty, but it is plain that where nature is suppressed, life persecuted, thought suspected, there beauty can not be. So æsthetic philosophy is almost irreconcilable with the Christian ideal. It conceives the being as the blossoming of the loftiest faculties of life, health, will, thought, joy, charity, love; and it is in the always-reviving harmony of these faculties that it recognizes ideal beauty. Far from suppressing the body, it desires in order that the soul shall be lovely that first of all the body shall be beautiful. All nature and all the creations of genius ought to be a grand spectacle of beauty in which the soul shall illuminate and embellish itself without end.

From this æsthetic union of nature and thought results a deplacement of the traditional axis of morality. The catalogue of the social and personal virtue of a religion which demanded holiness of us could not adapt itself to our ideal of beauty except by stripping off useless prejudices and enriching itself with new virtues.

Active morality, the realm of free will does not, as I have established, include formal duties, it has a different and loftier sphere, than those of negative and imperative morality; it is the ensemble of the means proposed to the human soul to realize the supreme beauty of action; it consists of the æsthetic virtues. What those virtues are, that is our task to try and tell at present. But one should make no mistake concerning the intention of such an attempt; while enumerating some of the virtues that constitute æsthetic morality, I do not pretend any more to complete the list than to assign the bounds of the infinite activity of moral will.

Besides, there would be need of a definition of vices in order to complete that of virtues; these in fact have not, all of them, properly speaking a positive existence; for instance sobriety has a right to the name of virtue only because a certain gluttonous act like drunkenness is a vice. Vices themselves—whence do they get their character of immorality? Because they are always in the same measure destructive of health and life, hostile to the development of life as well as to the blossoming of beauty. Vices are ugly, and that is what makes virtues beau-

tiful. A moralist might feel himself satisfied with that criterion of beauty and ugliness, for we have a sufficiently delicate and sure sense of one and the other to guide us in practical life. But to entrench ourselves behind such a criterion would be this: our thesis would lose, if not its clearness, still at least some of its frankness. Let us then continue this short essay of classification.

The philosophy of the Eighteenth Century and the Revolution has added some virtues to Christian virtues; those belong among those duties of social reciprocity which, summed up in the obligation to respect the will of the Ideal in others, constitutes the very groundwork of the imperative morality. Among the Christian virtues the believer places the religious virtues in the front rank, and of these we have no examination to make; they overstep the frame. The others, while belonging to the concept of eternal life, are the more properly moral virtues, but all of them do not harmonize with the æsthetic morality.

Humility constitutes one of the highest merits of the perfect Christian. Jesus particularly cherished and recommended it; it opens the portals of heaven, but, it is true, only to reverse the terrestrial ranks; this temporary abasement earns in repayment an eternity of glory (that is the taxation for all the Christian virtues). But so far as we Frenchmen are concerned, we who have made political revolutions in the name of quality and do not expect any other result or profit from the good we desire to do than that very same good itself, a humility which deprives us of our dignity is neither beautiful nor useful nor healthy. When it is affected, it has the ugliness of hypocrisy; when sincere, it is merely one form of timidity or I know not what fear of living at the full, and is no better than a lying grimace. The simplest man should bring into social life a smiling visage, the graciousness and communicative sympathy of a serene and strong conscience.

Christianism has pushed to an excess the horror of the sins of the flesh, by which, according to Bossuet's word, the human race "is born odious to God." Certainly modesty has its grace and bold debauchery is a hideous thing. But Christian continence and the fear of pleasure astound nature. Does not every being owe its own being to love and voluptuousness? What mystery is there more chaste and beautiful than voluptuousness in love?

Moreover is it not plain that there is no more morality than there is æsthetic elegance in depriving oneself severely of the indeed quite sensual pleasures of taste? Gormandizing only becomes a vice when it attacks our physical health, absorbs or injures our intellectual faculties, in fine, when it diminishes our physical or mental being.²⁵

In themselves mortifications have no virtue whatever; the smallest act of charity contains infinitely

Note 25.—That which constitutes vice is neither the accomplished act nor the intention in which it has been accomplished. There are harmful acts and habits, degrading and ugly; we call them vices. Thus, in the eyes of natural morality there are no other vices in themselves than ugliness itself. Immorality of the pretended vices is subordinated to the effects which they produce, and since the gravity of these effects is determined by the temperaments of the individuals who suffer them, the gravity and even the immorality of the faults and vicious habits are measured definitively by the force of resistance which individuals oppose to their destructive action.

more true morality and beauty than the wounds given by hair-shirts and flagellations.

Christian morality condemns untruth. Does it prescribe loyalty? Yet that is nevertheless an essentially æsthetic virtue, as necessary to social harmony as the harmony of the conscience. There is no beauty without truth—that is a very ancient adage—because in untruth the human spirit vacillates and loses itself. There is no lofty and pure soul, there is no moral beauty without a perfect loyalty. And for all of us whose consciences society has, if not deformed, at least weakened, it becomes a second nature to acquire that modest virtue.

But from the doctrine of Christ æsthetic morality can borrow sweetness, kindliness, indulgence, that atmosphere of peace where the love of humanity can be born and grow, that love almost unknown to the world which some great men have sung and which remains little more than a lovely legend. Sociability is a great virtue that we need not doubt, since man can not escape from society and he is obliged to await therefrom the realization of the conditions of existence by whose aid he may accomplish his terrestrial dream.

Christianism condemns hatred and envy, two passions perhaps uglier than alcohol. It recommends generosity, of hand and heart; in those two forms it is beautiful.

It is altruistic, for it asks the sacrifice of human good for the sake of unhappiness, and orders that souls shall be dragged, even if force is necessary, to eternal salvation. But it is still more egotistical, for although it commands us to abandon our property and even life, as much for the solace of the terrestrial sufferings of the wretched as for the definitive redemption of souls, it does not prescribe that we shall buy those souls at the cost of our own salvation. As soon as eternity is in question—and what is life at that price?—the Christian becomes an egotistical speculator. But the Divine Redeemer himself only gave a short life and accepted some hours of suffering. Whatever the Christian legend may say, that was a slight sacrifice for an eternal God compared with the final redemption of humanity as a whole; and when we see precious existences immolating themselves without a regret for the salvation of useless and desolated existences, it gives one sorrow and hope at one and the same time to reflect, that humanity has always been of more value than its gods.

We have already stated what a pitfall altruism conceals: the expression of those who devote themselves to altruism exercised upon those to whom they minister. Sacrifice, the extreme and most tangible form of altruism, is as often dangerous as it is efficacious; very seldom is it necessary, still more seldom does the result of the sacrifice offer a proper reward for the price paid. Moreover, it would be a grave mistake to make sacrifice the touchstone of love; there are plenty of other methods of helping mankind, such as fine works and grand acts. Anyhow, renunciation could never become a universal rule of conduct; in fact it is necessary that those for whom one sacrifices oneself shall really profit by the sacrifice, in order that it shall not prove quite useless, that is to say in a word, it is necessary that they shall be egoists. The career of abnegation of self and devotion

to one's brotherman is only to be embraced by wretches to whom existence no longer offers a personal interest making it worth while to strive to live, that being their last hope and supreme happiness. It would be an incalculable imprudence to desire universal sacrifice. Wisdom and charity do not ordain that we renounce beauty and joy, but they counsel us—and that would be a very æsthetic happiness—to make largess of joy and beauty to the wretched who suffer.²⁶

Shall we dare to say that a useless sacrifice is ugly? What makes the beauty in it is the development of life, thought, ideal which it facilitates. Just as soon as it includes a dry and unrecompensed loss of force and intelligence or of hope, it strips off all its grandeur and a little ridicule falls on that perchance sublime will which inspired it.

Altruism is a virtue. Kindness is a beauty and a virtue. Love is beautiful; it is a virtue. However free it is and an enemy to constraint, love nevertheless cultivates itself. Every virtue is a custom and to love is a custom. Like beauty, so love contains an entire morality within itself and Saint Augustine was not unfaithful to the thought of Christ when he wrote: "Love one another and do what you will!" But what an infrequent virtue is that in our world of calculators!

We boast of a flat honesty, of a contemptible probity to which in truth we can not do the honor to give the name of virtue. Shall I enumerate these hereditary habits? What were the use? Those which are based on relations of reciprocity enter into those elementary duties which we have posed for the essential condition—and the most humble—of the social life and morality, so that it is useless to name them. Besides, is it not the office of the individual conscience to decide what traditional virtues are prejudices, what other ones remain intelligent and beautiful? But virtues exist which are only æsthetic; we must name a few at least, and the reader may add to the list according to his will.

And first of all there is one that I know not by what name to call—happiness, wisdom, optimism? one that includes all three. Already have we recognized that happiness can not offer either an ideal or an object of ambition which is anything more than the result of a balance struck between the

Note 26.—Altruism is the most delicate of the difficulties of morality. It embraces æsthetic morality less than any other doctrine, because devotion is in its essence beautiful. But the development of the individual has its beauty also. It remains to each one of us to make our choice according to the character of the æsthetic sensibility each one possesses. Obligatory altruism would lose all its beauty and would be sterile; considered as a voluntary virtue, it touches the individual without oppressing him, and on the contrary, by favoring his expansiveness of sentiment, it reaches the highest pitch of fecundity.

As to the morality of interest, that is far from being contrary to altruism, it is infinitely nearer altruism than religions with their hypocritical immolation of terrestrial goods. Individual interest can not be separated from collective interest; every one of us finds some advantage in the betterment of the social mass as regards fortune and morality. Only, one has to observe, that in return the improvement of the individual's fortune has a happy influence on the moral and material betterment of collective man. No cause is lost. It is of importance to every one that his neighbor is good and also that he is happy. Within the bounds of morality and within those of happiness the solidarity of one and the other is close and infinite.

external conditions of life and the internal conditions of thought. To maintain that equilibrium in so far as we can—that is wisdom! This wisdom has been called the act of being happy; I prefer to regard happiness as a virtue.

Happiness—difficult to achieve, difficult to retain—is it not really an egoistic benefit? While being happy through those who love us, we help the latter to their own happiness. Wisdom commands optimism, which is at once the art of adapting oneself to the actual conditions of life and a very powerful means to produce better conditions. Optimism is significant like pessimism; it reveals the healthiness of the spirit as pessimism betrays its disease. Like it, optimism is communicative, it has the same contagious sympathy. Too fragile to permit philosophy to place in it the goal of

human energy, happiness—or rather the habit of happiness—is one of the agents of the æsthetic ideal; morality may count it among the virtues.²⁷

Note 27.—People may ask concerning happiness, is it decidedly a result or a virtue? Choose, then!—Why? If happiness is the result of an equilibrium, this equilibrium depends on a habit, which, besides, it contributes to create: that same habit, behold in it virtue!—You will not contest the adage that makes happiness consist in opinion? The opinion of happiness may become a habit—there is virtue again!

I know well that strictly speaking it is the term optimism that is proper to that habit of the spirit and will; but it is such a fine word, this word optimism! and so precious and dear to men that I have not the courage to adopt another for it, in order to designate that exquisite virtue, the clemency of which knows how to preserve our joys and respect the joys of others.—A smile is a virtue and likewise is graciousness.

To be continued.

OLD WELLS

[Do not fill up old wells—*Proverb*]

*Though you forget to love,
Love is a living thing....
An ill unmeasured comes
If you choke up the spring.*

They sent me on a day
To fill an ancient well:
If there had been a house
None now remained to tell.

But all amid the grass
I found a myrtle spray
And a bitter scent of box
Rose up along the way.

A well—without a sweep
Nor was there left a curb;
A warped plank lay across
Half hid in struggling herb.

Deep down the water gleamed
A buried pane of blue
That cracked athwart like glass.
At the first earth I threw,

And the first earth I threw—
It had the grave-clod's sound
And something seemed alive
That cried far underground!

But I began to sing
My gloomy thoughts to save;
The song became the croon
Of one who digs a grave.

I bent me to my task,
I hurled the brown earth in—
But suddenly around
There was a murmured din!

I lifted up mine eyes,
The heart within me sunk—
For They all stood round about
Who ever there had drunk!

With asking looks They leaned
"Give us to drink—we thirst!"
And then I learned that he
Who fills a well is cursed.

They were—and were not—ay,
They vanished as They came
As though the noon should drop
Upon a candle-flame.

*Sweet, though you love no more,
Do not quite close your heart,
So that no place is mine,
Lest Ghosts of Memory start.*

Edith M. Thomas